

What to Expect from the Gospel - Acts 17:32-34 – November 16th, 2008

- As we now come to the end of chapter 17, we also come to the end of Paul's "Mars Hill" message at this meeting of the Aeropagus.
- After this, Paul will leave Athens and continue on in his second missionary journey to the port city of Corinth as we'll see in chapter 18.
- However, before we go to Corinth in chapter 18, there are these last 3 verses here in chapter 17 that, I believe, beg for a closer look.
- Here's why; "it seems that the Holy Spirit wants us to see what happens after Paul preaches the gospel to this pagan steeped crowd.

- I submit to you that Luke, by the Holy Spirit, may have recorded these details in these verses, to encourage us when sharing our faith.
- This study of this text can really minister to us who may be discouraged when we don't see an immediate response to the Gospel.
- So far, the Holy Spirit has taught us, in the person of the Apostle Paul, how to present the Gospel, and what to present in the Gospel.

- Now I believe the Holy Spirit wants us to know what we can expect from the Gospel, which is why I've titled this teaching this way.
- At the beginning of this series, I mentioned how that I wasn't of the school of thought that believed Paul regretted his sermon in Athens.
- Some commentators suggest that Paul's message was compromised for an intellectual audience, as evidenced by the few conversions.
- That being said; before we look at this seemingly dismal response Paul had after preaching the Gospel there, I want to address this.

- Critics of Paul's sermon believe the reason for a few conversions was that Paul didn't specifically quote scripture or mention the cross.
- The argument is that, after Athens, Paul resolved in his heart to preach the cross and the cross only, even if it seemed foolish to do so.
- The critics cite two references in Paul's first Corinthian letter, because he went to Corinth after leaving this Mars Hill meeting in Athens.

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. NIV

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 1 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. NIV

Because of this, commentators popularized the theory that Paul was disappointed by his "meager" results in Athens, and went on to Corinth preaching the gospel with a pure focus on the cross, and without any attempt at philosophical explanation, which is why more people came to Christ in Corinth than in Athens.

- While I can understand why these commentators are critical of Paul's sermon, I'm not in agreement with them for the following reasons:

1. It's not recorded for us show us what "not" to do

- I don't think Luke would be inspired by the Holy Spirit to use rare and costly parchment to record a sermon to show us what not to do.
- Were that the case, it would be as meaningless and leave us as helpless as a sign in town saying; "This is not the way to Kaneohe!"

2. It's scriptural through and through

- Though not specifically quoted Paul's sermon was Biblical throughout, brilliantly worded and most fitly spoken for a paganized crowd.

"Like the biblical revelation itself, his argument begins with God the creator of all and ends with God the judge of all . . . The speech as it stands admirably summarizes an introductory lesson in Christianity for cultured pagans."

F.F. Bruce

3. Its focal point "is" Jesus Christ and Him crucified

- Paul did in fact preach Christ and Him crucified in verse 31 where he specifically and even vehemently mentions the resurrection.
- In other words, how could he have preached the resurrection without preaching the cross and the crucifixion that came before it?

"We learn from Paul that we cannot preach the gospel of Jesus without the doctrine of God, or the cross without the creation, or salvation without judgment."

John Stott

4. It's effectiveness can't be based on the response

- To say that Paul's sermon was ineffective because only a few people got saved is dangerous at best and implies the unthinkable.
- Large numbers should not and cannot be the litmus test used to determine whether or not our evangelism or ministry is successful.

One commentator explained Paul's small numbers this way; "The reason the gospel did not take root there probably lay more in the attitude of the Athenians themselves than in Paul's approach or in what he said."

5. It's not all that Paul preached in his sermon

- This obviously has to be a short extract or outline of Paul's sermon because what's recorded here takes less than two minutes to say.
- So why did I take more than thirty minutes of my sermon to argue why Paul's more than two minute sermon was actually successful?
- Let me answer that this way; it's vital we not dismiss Paul's sermon because there is so much encouragement woven into its fabric.

- First, in verses 22-23, I can be encouraged by Paul in learning "How to Present the Gospel."
- Second, in verses 24-31, I can be encouraged by Paul in learning "What to Present in the Gospel."
- And now, in verses 32-34, I can be encouraged by Paul in learning "What to expect from the Gospel."

1. Some will sneer (Verse 32a)

32a When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, **some of them sneered**,

v32a It says that some of them sneered when they heard about the resurrection. This would have really jammed their intellectual gears.

One commentator said it this way; "The resurrection was not a popular concept among Greek philosophers. Some thought Paul foolish for even believing such a thing. ...The Greeks were fond of the idea of the immortality of the soul, but not of the idea of the resurrection of the body. They felt that anything material was inherently evil, so there really could be no such thing as a 'glorified' body."

2. Others will want to hear more (Verse 32b)

32b but others said, **"We want to hear you again on this subject."**

v32b While some sneered, there were others who wanted to hear more on the subject. Perhaps Paul talked with them one on one after.

- "Love," needs to grow as the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives in order to produce gentleness, kindness and patience in our evangelism.

3. Few will believe and follow (Verses 33-34)

33 At that, Paul left the Council. 34 **A few men became followers of Paul and believed**. Among them was Dionysius, a member of the Areopagus, also a woman named Damaris, and a number of others.

v33-34 Notice that after Paul leaves a few became followers and believed. There is a difference between being a believer and a follower.

- Just because one says they're believer doesn't necessarily mean they are really saved. A true believer is evidenced by being a follower.

James 2:14, 17-19 14 What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? ...17 In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. 18 But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. 19 You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that-and shudder. NIV

- The bottom line is this: Don't be discouraged if when what you expected from your sharing Christ doesn't come to pass as you hoped.

- Some people will sneer at you thinking you to be foolish, but others will want to hear more, and a few will believe and follow the Lord.

- Here's a story that originated as an inspirational writing then adapted as an analogy, illustrating how people can respond to the gospel.

After a few of the usual Sunday evening hymns, the church's pastor once again slowly stood up, walked over to the pulpit, and gave a very brief introduction of his childhood friend. With that, an elderly man stepped up to the pulpit to speak, "A father, his son, and a friend of his son were sailing off the Pacific Coast," he began, "when a fast approaching storm blocked any attempt to get back to shore. The waves were so high, that even though the father was an experienced sailor, he could not keep the boat upright, and the three were swept into the ocean." The old man hesitated for a moment, making eye contact with two teenagers who were, for the first time since the service began, looking somewhat interested in his story. He continued, "Grabbing a rescue line, the father had to make the most excruciating decision of his life: to which boy he would throw the other end of the line. He only had seconds to make the decision. The father knew that his son was a Christian, and he also knew that his son's friend was not. The agony of his decision could not be matched by the torrent of waves. As the father yelled out to his already agreeing and understanding son, 'I love you, son!' he threw the line to his son's friend." "By the time he pulled the friend back to the capsized boat, his son had disappeared beyond the raging swells into the black of night. His body was never recovered."

By this time, the two teenagers were sitting straighter in the pew, waiting for the next words to come out of the old man's mouth. "The father," he continued, "knew his son would step into eternity with Jesus, and he could not bear the thought of his son's friend stepping into an eternity without Jesus. Therefore, he sacrificed his only son. How great is the love of God that He should do the same for us. Our heavenly Father sacrificed his only begotten son that we could be saved. I urge you to accept His offer to rescue you and take a hold of the life line He is throwing out to you in this service." With that, the old man turned and sat back down in his chair as silence filled the room. The Pastor again walked slowly to the pulpit and delivered a brief sermon with an invitation at the end. However, no one responded to the appeal.

Within minutes after the service ended, the two teenagers were at the old man's side. "That was a nice story," politely started one of the boys, "but I don't think it was very realistic for a father to give up his son's life in hopes that the other boy would become a Christian." "Well, you've got a point there," the old man replied, glancing down at his worn Bible. A big smile broadened his narrow face, and he once again looked up at the boys and said, "It sure isn't very realistic, is it? But I'm standing here today to tell you that THAT story gives me a glimpse of what it must have been like for God to give up His son for me. You see . . . I was that father, and your pastor is my son's friend."